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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effects of the language used in the school environment on girls' perspectives on femininity. Subjects were aged 4-11, and were the only girls in a small rural Australian school. Data were gathered by analysis of spoken and written language used in the classroom. Analysis focused on relationships and socialization as reflected in language use. The texts discussed include stories written by the girls and transcripts of conversations. Style of writing, perceptions of their own role in the world, awareness of the future, the influence of popular fiction, differing relationships with different adults, and awareness of others' attitudes about women are examined. It is concluded that in all the language samples, the relationship between language and social structure is apparent, and that the encoding and transmission of culture occurs through language. Construction of text can either maintain the status quo or allow for change. Linear, non-linear, and non-structural aspects of text are all viewed as essential considerations. (MSE)

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FEMINISM FOR GIRLS; LINGUISTIC PRACTICE IN RURAL AUSTRALIA

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FEMINISM FOR GIRLS: LINGUISTIC PRACTICE IN RURAL AUSTRALIA

The study I am engaged in involves seven girls. They are aged between four and eleven. The girls spend five school days together each week in a classroom. They are the only girls attending their school. There is about the same number of boys at this school, which is in a very small town in the country.

The reason I am working with the girls is to see what happens in the classroom and outside of it that causes them to develop the positions they do regarding their femininity. That women and girls construct for ourselves a gendered subjectivity is one of the theories I am engaged with. In particular, I am interested in the things that are said and the things that are written at this school. The girls I am seeing are speaking and writing subjects. They are also the objects and the subjects of other people's writing and conversations.

RESEARCH METHODS

Looking at the language that is spoken and the language that is written in this context, then, is the way I have chosen to study the construction of femininity in young girls. To do this without being overly invasive, and whilst still producing credible data, I have elected to work with a minimum amount of fuss, and with a minimum amount of research paraphernalia. Hence my accessories are a small notebook, a tiny tape recorder and sometimes a cheap camera. The visits I make to the school are weekly, the girls calling me by my first name and knowing I am researching their language.

This naturalistic form of research provides me with access to everyday actions and interactions. For oral discourses produced in the school I have records in the form of audio transcripts and notes. For written discourses produced I have photocopies that the girls themselves make for me and give to me. I hope to work like this for a three year period, this year being my second. Having been a teacher of young children myself and having mothered four young children of my own, I bring to my study my own positions regarding the natures of learning, of language and of feminism.

FEMINISM IN PRACTICE

The title for this paper is contentious. Feminism for girls is what we as feminists want to happen: we want the women of the future to benefit from the experiences of our pasts, we want them to be aware of the choices they can take, we want them to be conscious of their own gendered subjectivities and to develop a sisterhood. However, in observing and reflecting on the things that occur in practice in the school where I am working, I cannot in honesty say that linguistic practice here is an example of feminism. As I understand its use, a colon extends the meaning of the clause or the title before it. I have used a semicolon to indicate that the meaning of linguistic practice in rural Australia is the converse of feminism.

I am unhappy with this judgement though. For the longer I look at what the girls actually write, the more I see that the whole issue is

extraordinarily complex. At times the girls act in their own feminist interests: in other words, sometimes they can be seen to take over the agency of their own lives and to actively construct a positive stance regarding womanhood. At other times they revert to traditional ways of depicting girls and women, boys and men. Here they write about feminine characters who are passive, mostly silent and in positions that are subservient to the male characters. That the same girls produce both kinds of messages is one of the theoretical dilemmas being posed by the data I am collecting.

INCONSISTENCY, AMBIGUITY AND MULTI-MEANING

Thinking and acting inconsistently is not an easy matter to deal with, either in practical terms or in theoretical terms. For theoreticians, it may be necessary also to abolish the accepted binary frameworks for analysing such situations, data, and meanings. Making sense of information that conflicts, that appears unpredictable, that means more than one thing at the same time, that is made up of a hotch-potch of events, experiences and human beings, is difficult. In order to explain these things as accurately as possible, it seems that new forms of explanation are needed. Simply seeing a constantly balanced continuum of cause and effect, black and white, right and wrong, appears to me as not only simplistic but as a gross distortion. Analysing and theorizing human reality, then, requires finely honed perception and much insight on the part of the researcher. It also demands a flexible framework for the analysis and, sometimes, boundless peripheries for the cases selected for study.

Deconstructing the already constructed has become one of the activities of feminist theoreticians, particularly those involved in the literary or the visual arts. Depicting life as multi-faceted and multi-meaninged is, after all, the business of the arts, and to be more or less expected of them. Complexity and lack of fixedness, however, has been dealt with much less often by researchers operating outside the art worlds. Applying a poststructuralist approach to everyday action and to naturalistic discourse is not something we see being done by psychologists or linguists very often. The whole framework on which these disciplines are built is one of either/or, this/that and no/yes. At this stage in my own research I am intending to integrate a post-structuralist approach into my analyses of the case, as, theoretically, it has a strong attraction for me as a feminist. There seems to me to be no adequate reason why a feminist analysis cannot, in fact, comprise many conclusions, and many ways of seeing the same information. Getting beyond the traditionally established structures set up by a culture that has been predominantly patriarchal, seems to be a necessary part of feminist change.(Weedon, 1987, Caine, Grosz and de Lepervanche, 1988, Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989).

The problem is to accomodate the fact that life is multi-faceted, and that no one story can ever be accurate as a single reading of a situation. The solution, it seems to me, lies in a simple answer: telling more than one story about the data accumulated by the researcher. After all, this is the way we make sense of the story of our own lives when we look back and try to see what has become of us and

where we are going. At one time we tell ourselves one particular set of explanations for what we have done or what we have said; at another time we tell ourselves a totally different set of reasons as to why we acted or spoke as we did. Beginning to see that life is a story happens to us when we begin to see some sort of pattern in our lives. The patterns we see, though, can change with the place where we stand, the people we stand with and the quality of the time between the original action and the reflection of it.

LITERARY TEXT

This solution of telling many stories as a way of making sense of events has been arrived at before. In literature, a multiple ending, or an ambiguous ending, of a novel is no longer a stylistic crime on the part of the author. Readers of novels have become accustomed to having to either construct for themselves the best alternative ending to the narrative, or to accepting that there simply may be more than one simultaneously appropriate conclusion. A novel that comprises an amalgam of genres, rather than the traditional single one, may today be seen as having something important to say about the construction of the novel itself; as such it may also be important for the evolution of the reading of the novel form itself. Literary critics of a post-structuralist inclination see such writing as metafiction in that it produces a self-conscious reading and a series of mirrored speculations (Hutcheon, 1984, Ommundsen, 1988).

For feminists with a background in literature, it seems obvious to look at the published literary texts of women to see what they are saying about their own female consciousness and their experience of being women (Spender, 1988, Whitlock, 1988). For those with an inclination to write in a literary way, feminism offers both an understanding audience and a chance to break new ground in terms of both content and textual form (Couani and Gunew, 1988, Hawthorne and Pausacker, 1989).

For feminists without a formal literature background from an "education" institution, the literary scene is not without impact. Contact with the power of the pen, the publisher and the computer has caused many a reader to make radical changes to her life and her awareness of ideology. This listening to, or reading, of feminist poetry, feminist short stories, feminist novels and feminist writings of not so easily classifiable literary genres, has been an important part of the sharing of experiences, the awareness of sisterhood and the empowering of women. That women's literary text has an attraction for literate, but not necessarily literature-schooled women, is not surprising given the natures of the fields such writing addresses, the nature of its writers in relation to its readers and the nature of the produced text itself.

SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

These aspects of writing are addressed rigorously by a group of linguists of a systemic functional persuasion. A grammar-based approach to the study of spoken and written texts, systemic linguistics addresses the syntactic effects of the social setting, of interpersonal

relationships and of exemplary language resulting from the combination of the two (Halliday, 1985, Threadgold, 1986). However, the application of such study, as with other forms of linguistics, has been, to date, mostly to spoken language and not to written langauge (Applied Linguistics Association of Australia National Conference, 1989). As far as feminism is concerned, systemic linguistics has been virtually untapped. Cameron, (1985), for example, although dealing specifically with "feminism and linguistic theory", makes no mention of systemics, nor of the growing group of Australian researchers operating from Halliday's theorizings (Inaugural Australian Systemics Network Conference, 1990). Poynton, (1985) writes of differences between genders and the linguistic constructions of those differences. These differences are documented solely from a spoken language perspective, with no exemplary written material being produced by the gendered subjects themselves.

Problems in working within a systemic framework, for me, are that the many dimensions of meanings and the ambiguities of people and events cannot be contained by one interpretation. The factors alluded to earlier in this paper, with regard to literary, psychoanalytic and artistic interpretations of writing, seem unable to be dealt with by what is at base a traditionally scientific and binary framework for analysis. Deconstruction, post-modernism and poststructuralism operate from what appear to be totally different dimensions from those dealt with by linguistics. Systemics, although attractive because of its ability to theorize social issues in relation to texts produced, has limitations in this regard. The age-old problem of the differences

between the "sciences" and the "arts" appears to be the cause of the rift between people looking at language one way and people looking at it in another. A question I am asking is: is it possible to combine the two to make a valid feminist statement about the way we use language?

FURTHER QUESTIONS

That the making of meanings lies in our use of language is not a new theory (Malinowksy, 1923, Vygotsky, 1962, Goodman, 1965, Britton, 1970, Halliday, 1975). Not all of these men, however, would be labelled by their readers as "linguists": one is primarily an anthropologist, one a psychologist and one an educationist. If we look at women theorists who have influenced our understanding of language, we read about language that has silenced us or alienated us (Kristeva, 1969, Lakoff, 1975, Daly, 1979, Rich, 1978, Spender, 1980, Cameron, 1986, Moi, 1986); about women's different meanings for words (Kramarae and Treichler, 1985); and about the functions of language within a social and patriarchal context (Poynton, 1985, Pauwels, 1987). Again, not all of these writers are linguists.

Questions confronting us, then, are: what is the place of linguists in the study of women? Is linguistics simply a study of language or does it have to have some kind of scientific mystique? How can we cope with being students of literature and a students of linguistics at the same time? Can the study of linguistics be basically sociological and can it be purely qualitative? How can the border lines of literary and non-literary texts be blurred to give a new kind of reading of both

published and unpublished texts? Why is it that linguists continue to focus mainly on the spoken word and not on the written or the non-verbal? What would a truly interdisciplinary study of language look like and what methods would it employ?

Questions asked by putting the stocking on the other leg include: what impact is feminism having, as regards linguistics, on breaking down the barriers of malestream academia, with its male-established paradigms for research and for validity of findings? And what is the politics of theorizing as a feminist within malestream academia?

In querying these matters, I therefore present some of the data I have been collecting. I would value advice regarding analysis and meanings in the light of the problems I have been describing.

* * * * *

TEXT 1

The Gost house

One day Sonja and I Where bord (bored) we went outside a Gosthous was there So we went inside it was qoiyt (quiet) it was emty we saw a Gost and then we ran there was no way out so we jast ran and ran we were going in sogls (circles) we jast ran and ran I said to Soja there is no way to outside she said I no
we fell in a trap we found a pasig (passage) it was like a hall way we went threw it. it was dake (dark) and it was loge (like) we where back

from when we sarte (started) from this time we went the difrnt way so we wod no (would not) go in the trap we did not see the Gost it got darck we jast went wocking (walking)

it wse sill dack and qiyt (dark and Quiet) I said to Sonja I no (know) there is a Gost haer woching (here watching) us There it is we said together this time we chast (chassed) the Gost it was not a Gost it was a person he prest a buttn we went in to a hall a man put us in a cach (cage) he didn't tack (take) the key when he was gon we opend it and went out we went into a room Sonja said look haer there was a bottl it said machik mederson (magic medicine) we took it with us I said we wont to go home the machik mederson will do it we said together but it did't tack us home I said to Sonja it cood mack (could make) the door so we can go home

Sally 31.10.89

One of the positions taken by Sally regarding her femininity here is that she operates in close colaboration with Sonja. Women-in-relation-to-other-people is a predominating aspect of our lives. In much of literature written by women this comes across as a central concern (Rowland, 1988, Spender, 1988,Sheridan, 1988, Whitlock, 1989). Sally's position in relation to Sonja is as an equal, neither girl having more power than the other in this situation. In real life Sally is aged seven and Sonja, who attends the same school as Sally, is one year older. From what I have seen of Sally she in fact operates more by herself than any of the other girls do. Although a part of the group she is often seen to

be playing by herself and when writing she rarely gets the other children to help her. It is usual in this school for the girls to talk informally with each other about what they are writing whilst they are putting it down on paper.

In "The Gost house" Sally takes quite a deal of initiative. She is the one who announces that there is no way outside,
that the ghost is watching them and that the magic medicine could transform the door so that they can go home. Togetherness is typified by the sentence both girls say in chorus: "There it is."

Another position taken by Sally in this piece of writing is that of the girls' position to men. It is quite clear that tha ghost is to be feared. Although the two girls took the initiative in the first place and ventured inside the quiet ghost house together, they run and run in order to escape. The running is described in graphic detail so that a reader senses the fear and the hopelessness of running. The ghost, who turns out to be a man, puts the girls in a cage (Walkerdine, 1989; 47). Not stopped by this, the girls escape to find the magic medicine that possibly provides them eventually with the safety of home. It is of interest that this is the end of the narrative. At this stage of her writing Sally photocopied the text of her constructing for me, announcing its completion. She did not return to the writing of it and was quite definite that it was finished.
Later she told me (5.3.90) that she ended the story because it was playtime. And no she didn't ever write any more of it.

Although the man originally thought to be a ghost frightenes the two girls, they outsmart him, maybe because there are two of them. and the story ends (?) on what appears to be a positive note.

TEXT 2

Dieing Love

"There Mike is again" murmed Kate (that's me)
I know isn't he cute" said Jane
He's looking this way turn away act normal they both whispered.
He's looking at Andrea again. he always ,looks at her, did you see him looking at her all through science class this morning. What's so special about her? She's just as pretty as us. Come on. Let's go outside now. OK I've finished. What do you want to do? talk I spose. less compare each other OK Andrea first: brown straight hair brown eyes, Average height ears piersed, twice
You now
Kate: black curley hair, green eyes, Avarage height, ears pierced twice.
Jane: blond hair (straight) blue eyes. Avarage height, ears pierced twice.
O.K. so that us and Andrea. just avarage year llers.
Hardley and difference. Let's go on to the basketball court and watch the boys playing if there out of the cafeateria and stopped looking at Andrea yet.

We went down there and there was nobody there so we decided to go down to the oval and talk we just got there and a football came straight for us I caught it and someone grabbed me from behind and tackled the ball off meas I got free. I turned around and there was Mike. at that moment I think I went red afterwards Jane told me I looked like my face was going to explode Mike just said hi and walked away.
We both started luaghing I went even reder and we walked way down to the other side of the oval and talked soon Andrea walked down to the oval Mike stopped playing and walked off with Andrea Jane and I both looked at each other and frowned Oh well Jane sighed we just sat there saying nothing till the bell rang.

Margaret, November 1989

This piece of writing continues at some length, this obviously being the end of one of its parts. After some digressions, which include another day in school and the narrator's mother having to be put to bed drunk, Kate, who Margaret tells us is herself, gets "five prank phone calls".

I picked up the phone and said hello I just got hung up on.

On page six of her eight page story, eleven year old Margaret tells us:

I felt too tired to go to school in the morning but I still went Me and Jane trudged off to Maths class as soon as we got there what a way to start the day!

Later she tells us more of her story:

...After about twenty minutes someone walked up behind me and said Hi I turned around there was Mike smiling as always I was very surprised. Hi I said, Hi he said I turned back round He said he was the one ringing me he didn't the guts to talk to me.
We got up started walking back to the basketball court as soon as we got there Andrea ran up to Moke and Mike flung his arms around her, and I walked over to Jane.
Mike and Andrea walked off together I was confused I thought Will he ring me I don't know why but he came up to the oval to get me I wonder why but it was plain to me and Jane he was in love with Andrea.

Margaret ends her story almost immediately with:

Four years later.....Me and Jane are still friends I'm a waitress part time and I go to an acting school the rest of the time.
Jane well she's a full time cook at the resturant I wait at.

DISCUSSION

If Text 1 seems to be influenced by the tellers of Hansel and Gretel. The Three Bears and ghost stories around the camp-fire, then Text 2 must be seen as having its genesis in the genre of Mills and Boon, Sweet Dreams and the like. Both writers have internalized very well the style of writing of the particular genre they wish to produce, complete with

its rhythms, its characteristic wording, its sequencing of events and the timing of each episode. In terms of gender, the reader gets from each text a picture of a girl. In each case the girl writer has told me it is herself. What therefore do we see when presented with these two pictures?

That femininity, in various guises, is emerging through the writings of these two girls is apparent. The positions taken in "Dieing Love" and in "The Gost House" are different. The writer of "Dieing Love" positions herself as a teenage girl in high school and then four years later. By doing this, she shows us that she thinks about what will become of her. She also thinks about the relationship of what happens today to what happens tomorrow. Being aware of the importance of present actions to future outcomes is a major feature of this particular text. The togetherness of the girls is another feature of the story line. Margaret, as writer, produces dialogue, descriptions and itemized information to give us a consistent picture of the ways adolescent girls talk, act and think. She does this not yet being one herself. In addition, she writes as an eleven-year-old living in a town where there is only one other girl her age and where the nearest city, of twenty-five thousand people, is twenty minutes drive away. It would appear that her contact with girls of the age of which she is writing is minimal. Added to this is the fact that the stories available for her to read at school, and have read to her at school by the class teacher, are certainly not contentual models for the kinds of images she inscripts. Where then do her models come from and from what is she getting her direction?

The answer, I think, must be that she has some kind of access the popular fiction commercially available for the pre-adolescent market and focussing, in narrative terms, on girls five years or so older. Observations with my own adolescent daughters and their friends have shown me that there is a huge market here and that the teenage or the pre-teenage bedroom is the place for the reading and the sharing of meanings reproduced by such texts. That Margaret is critical of such publications could be one interpretation of her own production of a text in this particular genre. Studies show that the readings of popular fiction by adolescent girls can, in fact, be a subversive practice (McRobbie, 1981, Radway, 1984, Gilbert, in Corcoran and Evans, 1987).If this is the case, then Margaret is engaging in a form of feminist practice as a critic of prevailing ideology. One of the research activities I intend undertaking this year involves talking with the girls at home about some of the writings they produced last year. It seems likely that by this stage there should have been some development in the girls' critical reflections and in their abilities to articulate such semantics.

POSITIONS

The position taken by the writer of "The Gost House" has none of this possible element of criticism or of awareness. Aged approximately four years younger than Margaret, Sally is not yet satirizing, or sending up, a genre: suffice for her at this stage to be proficient in producing credibly scary narrative. However, certain features regarding issues

related to women do appear. The role of the female friend and the role of the unknown man are dominant here. As such, Sally's written language reflects what for her is social reality. It is possible that given another four years she will be producing writing similar to "Dieing Love" and with appropriately cynical titles. One of the questions I am asking of the data is: are there stages in the feminist awareness of young girls? In order to answer this question I intend working with this particular school over a period of some years to see whether, in fact, Sally's writing becomes like Margaret's and whether Kylie, aged four last year, eventually produces writing like Sally's.

A series of biographies of each of the seven girls I am working with is therefore being constructed. Methodologically, this modified ethnographic technique is neither linguistic nor psychological nor literary in a purist sense. Borrowing from different disciplines as it appears most appropriate, seems at this stage the most sensible way to conduct my research. The precedent in anthropology is to work in naturalistic ways; the precedent in history is to resarch by asking a series of questions and thus to arrive at the most likely reconstruction and explanation. Feminist research, being inter-disciplinary, offers the researcher a new kind of freedom to borrow and to devise. Thus the feminist re-searcher is in a position to employ history, anthropology, linguistics, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, or whatever, to search again with her different kinds of visions.

In order to see a small group of girls in relation to each other and in relation to their own particular worlds, some version of sociology needs

to be employed in addition to the possibilities of the disciplinary fields I have just listed. A sociolinguistic account of spoken and written language, however, seems insufficient to say all of the sorts of things I have alluded to. Interdisciplinary research that operates eclectically and addresses more than one particular audience of readers is called for. Those of us wishing to work with the freedom to draw on whatever it is we decide is of most use, have, however, the problem of obtaining sufficient competences. If it takes a lifetime of study and research to be proficient as an anthropologist, a psychoanalyst, or whatever, then what hope is there for the researcher who entends making use of a bit of this and a bit of that? The answer as I see it is that she needs a different kind of proficiency.

SPOKEN LANGUAGE AS CONTEXT FOR WRITING

The following conversation concerns Sally, who wrote "The Gost House", and me, the weekly researcher in the classroom.

23.3.89

JRJ: (to Sally) Can I take your photograph? (She's writing at her desk.)

Sally: No.

JRJ: Well will you take mine?

Sally: All right.

JRJ: Where do you want me to be?

Sally: Over in the library corner.

JRJ: OK, I'll get my writing. (She poses me in the library corner. A couple of boys come over and volunteer to use my camera also.)

Here Sally asserts herself enough to refuse my request to photograph her. I had not previously given my camera to any of the children in this study so she did not know that being a photographer herself could be an alternative to being the subject of the photograph. When I ask her where she wants me to be I give her the power to place me whereever she likes in the school. Sally has no hesitation about what she wants. She wants me in the library corner, where I have in fact photographed other children that day. I am therefore positioned as a child and she competently captures an adult posed with pen and paper, head down and hard at work. She tells me later that this is the first photograph she has ever taken.

Later that afternoon the teacher makes a request of Sally that she dares not refuse. This is because the position of the teacher is different from the position that I, as feminist researcher, have chosen to adopt. Her relationship with him, then, is one of subservience rather than of resistance.

Mr B: Sally, would you go and get your writing and show it to Jeanette?

Sally: (nods yes)

Sally in fact is so silenced by him that she does not reply. She simply complies. This is in spite of the fact that I have found her to frequently initiate conversations with me.

It is as if she sees no sense in a spoken response when compliance is all that is required. Also interesting here is the teacher's unawareness of my deliberate strategy to not ask the girls for their writing but to wait and see if they offer it to me. If they don't then I don't see it.

In fact, as Sally shows me the writing Mr B. orders her to show me, she does initiate a conversation.

Sally: (volunteering a conversation with me) My Mum and Dad and my friends and that are going to Rocklands for Easter.

According to my transcript, I say nothing in response to this piece of information about the forthcoming holidays and the fact that she is going to camp beside a dam. Ignoring my silence, she then reads me what she has written:

Sally: (reading) My Mum and Dad are getting the rabbits and I'm getting the horse. (This I understand because of actually being there. All the children have made cookies and cut them out with an animal-shaped cutter.

The cookies are arranged by each child into small hand- made Easter baskets. Sally's are in the shapes of a horse and a couple of rabbits.)

Systemic notions of field, tenor and mode are seen exemplified in many ways by these short texts of discourse and of writing. The people to whom Sally addresses herself cause quite considerable differences to the way she relates and the kinds of things she is prepared to say, or to write. The natures of the texts produced similarly change, according to what they are about and who they are for. In her writing, Sally retains some of her assertiveness in that she decides who will have what in advance of actually giving the cookies to her family as an Easter gift. She is, by this, using her writing to announce in advance what it is she intends to do. Written language, for Sally, aged seven, has an impotrant function. It allows her to be in control of a situation by planning in advance what is to happen. The written word in this case is used powerfully.

Margaret, the writer of "Dieing Love", initiates the following conversation with me:

2.5.89

Margaret: Do you wanna see what I wrote?
JRJ: OK. (Margaret hands me two pages of very neat handwriting.)
JRJ: Do you want me to read it out loud or to myself?
Margaret: To yourself.

Here, again, I am posing a question to a child. It is, however, a different kind of question from the kind asked in the previously quoted transcript with Sally and Mr B. It is more like the non-loaded question the girls ask each other:

Eve: (seemingly to herself) I don't know what to write.

(Pause. Maybe she wants me to direct her. I'm reading a book.) Are you starting a new story Margaret?

Margaret: Yes.

Here the two year six girls chat away together as they write. In fact, it is often the chat that causes the writing to take on the nature it does. On a previous day, the same two girls search for a suitable topic to write about. Because I am in the school that day, and because I have given them a certain amount of power over me, they eventually decide to write something mildly denegrading about me. This is something they are experimenting with. They want to see how far they can go. The spoken discourse that begins the writing is crucial to its final field, which, as I see it, is one of enquiring into the place of a woman. As eleven-year-olds, these two girls realize that time is running out for them as children, and they quickly take on patriarchal attitudes before it is too late and they have already joined, maybe against their wills, the ranks of grown-up females. In such a position, of course, they will no longer be able to denegrade their own sex in quite the same way.

11.4.89

I see the girls sitting together on the ground, their backs against the corrugated iron bike shed, their clipboards leaning on their knees.

Margaret: (loudly, to Eve) NO! "O" "R". (She's fixing up Eve's spelling.)

Eve: (to Margaret, they seem to be looking for suitable stories to write about) The Day Mrs B Backed Into The

Bike Shed. (Makes loud screech and crash noises)

And Mr B said, "That's coming out of her Expo money."

Margaret: The Day Natasha Got Her P Plates And Ran Over The Dog. (They both laugh.)

The first topic suggested denegrades the wife of the school's teacher. Having her back a car into the school bike shed is a measure of her incompetence as a driver, a typically patriarchal criticism of women. Eve's dramatization of the imagined action lets them both enjoy the woman's discomfort and humiliation a bit more than simply announcing a topic for their story would have done.

Margaret tops this topic by continuing the mockery and this time picking on another female, this time the absent Natasha. Although five years younger than these two, Natasha, who has now moved to another school, was a large and overweight grade one child, who resisted strongly anyone's efforts to put her in a non-dominant position. This resistance at times included resisting the teacher. Now that Natasha is absent, Margaret and Eve find it is both safe and quite a deal of fun to mock her, although I never observed them doing so whilst she was at this school.

When Margaret asks me the following week if I would like to see what she has written, (see previously quoted conversation, 2.5.89), she produces a written text entitled, "The Day Jeanette Tried To Get Her L Plates" (her plates as a learner driver). In this way the girls talked around the topic of denegradation, testing out stories ridiculing the wife of their teacher and the fat girl who left, before ultimately deciding to make fun of me. This act of defiance, I suspect, had no need to be aimed at a man, because at this stage the girls are rebelling at their own oncoming adulthood, which is to be inevitably female. In the same way, they will later, if they follow the patterns of so many girls before them, mock and deride their mothers.

The following is the text written by Margaret following the conversation transcribed:

TEXT 3

The Day Jeanette Tried To Get Her L Plates

Mum could you drive me down to the R.T.A.?
"OK." "Let's go."
"Mum now I don't think I want to go."
"Don't be a chicken."
I went down the path.
"I would like to get my licence please,"
"OK" "What's your name?"
Jeanette Wooly

"Hop in the car."

How do you I start it?

Don't you know?

"No"

"Turn the key"

Broom Broom

"Put your foot on the clutch and put it in the first gear."

"Where is that?"

Reve it up and a bit more

BRAKE BRAKE

BANG "You idoit, you made me hit my head"

"You told me to hit the brake"

"We'll go out on the road"

"OK"

"Go out the gate" BANG

"Now look what you have done to the gate. Stop swerving all over the road."

"I can't help it"

"Let's go back to the R.T.A."

"Well jeanette you have not passed the standard to get your L plates."

"Try next year when I am retired and the next person will have to put up with you."

"Can I use your phone to ring Mum to pick me up"

"Yes"

"Ring Ring"

Mum can you pick me up?

"Why didn't you get your L plates?"

"Well I will tell you in the car."

This piece of writing of Margaret's is complex in terms of feminist deconstruction. By beginning and ending the narrative with the mother and daughter dialogue, she shows her awareness of the importance of such a relationship. It is the mother to whom she returns and whom she leaves. It is the mother who will wait for explanations of dreadfulness at the end of the day and not insist that that they be made immediately. Margaret's awareness of the importance of women to each other and in relationships is obvious here.

In conflict with this acceptance of relationship is the fact that the entire piece of writing sets about denegrading me, the researcher in her classroom, the giver of books and a woman like her mother. This dilemma, I think, results from Margaret's need to still see women, at times, through pre-adolescent and, possibly, therefore, patriarchal eyes. In other words, it seems that at this late primary school stage she is obliged to deride women because she is not yet one herself. If this explanation is correct, she is able, by this, to maintain, for a little while longer, the views of a not-fully-gendered subject. She is able to enjoy joining the boys in mocking the women. And this is what the previously quoted conversation with Eve demonstrates, as first they mocked Natasha, the unacceptably fat girl who always spoke her mind, and then they mocked the teacher's wife.

Margaret's knowledge of car driving is quite precocious for an eleven-year-old. This too could be providing her with a problem, as she knows

that women drivers are laughed at by some men. What then will she do with her interest and her forthcoming skills with technology? Interestingly, the gender of the non-giver of the car licence is never given. This may simply be an omission on the part of the writer, but it could be interpreted as awareness of the potential for non-gendered officers and bureaucrats. The discourse produced by the teller of the story, however, is in conflict with this idea, as the police-person is overbearing, rude, and pompous. If this is to be the nature of the non-gendered police of the future, then we can easily guess at the sex of the model of this stereotyped discourse. Margaret's awareness of the conflicts and the choices awaiting her as a woman of the future are highly apparent in this piece of writing.

CONCLUSION

In all of these quoted texts of discourse and of writing, the relationship between language and the social structure that it embeds is apparent. The dialogic aspects of one text to the other are also in evidence. That non-linguistic data is a necessary part of recording what happens, can be seen by the need for the reliance on the actual presence of the researcher, in deciding how texts are to be best interpreted.

The encoding and the transmitting of culture occurs through the system of signs that language is. This signification is the business of language. The girls I am working with can be seen to be seen to be constantly engaging both with language and with the realizations, through it, that language enables them to have. These realizations are

what actively transmits the culture they are making their own. The setting of Ruralsville Primary School is both the cause and the result of this culture. Here we see culture and language as being culturally dependent.

The written texts, like the spoken, can be seen to be "an important source of cultural and linguistic change" (Threadgold, 1986). As regards feminism, women in texts are subjects. They are also challenging the texts, and in so doing they are writing themselves. At the same time, and as I see it, at surface level, there are the aspects of sexism in language that we are used to confronting.

Thus we see Margaret as assertive enough to make fun of an adult she knows will take the joke in good humour. Margaret is by this checking out her power and practising her resistance to being the underdog.Simultaneously, she is conforming to stereotypical attitudes.

The construction of text, therefore, allows for a maintainance of the status quo. It also allows for agency of change. Halliday says that the speaking subject is constructed through language (1975). By this, as users of language, we are constantly in processes of becomming. The question for girls is: what, or who, will they become?

Similarities between theories of linguists and semioticans (Threadgold, 1986) appear to contain possibilities for feminist scholars committed to interdisciplinary theorizing, reflecting and practising. "We must have a theory of language that makes no artificial distinction between system

(what people can mean) and text (what people do mean)" (1986;132). She advises us to consider not only analyses of the "linear linguistic structure of text" but also "non-linear" and "non-structural" aspects.

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